Tiffany Hannah

ENG W400

Writing Narrative

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Mechanical Strength

If you had asked me, even two years ago, what I wanted my career to be, a teacher of English and Language Arts would not have been my reply. However, now I am a senior who is entering her last year of undergraduate study in that very field. Part of why I never considered myself as an English teacher was because, although I have always been a fairly proficient writer, I never thought it was something I was equipped or interested in teaching to other people. Thankfully fate intervened and reminded me of a teacher who helped form me into the writer I am today.

As a freshman in high school, and one who had always done well academically in school, I was enrolled in the honors English class. There were about twenty of us who had been in the same English classroom since sixth grade, so we knew each other pretty well. We had all adapted to different types of teacher, but we had yet to encounter one who was quite as stringent as Mrs. Talbott. Mrs. Talbott was an older woman who had been teaching for thirty-five plus years, and she came from a more “old-school” approach to writing and grammar. We were drilled in punctuation exercises, the differences between independent and dependent clauses, subordinating conjunctions versus coordinating conjunctions, and any other possible mechanic aspect of writing there is. All of this was culminating to a final research paper that we were assigned to write over one of our country’s major wars/conflicts. I was assigned to the World War II group, and my topic was the Holocaust. While I was deeply interested in my topic, my fear of actually writing the paper was overwhelming. During the course of the class, I had yet to receive anything higher than a B on any writing assignment for Mrs. Talbott, and this research paper was a huge portion of our grade. While a B is not a bad grade by any means, I desperately wanted to show her I actually did know “proper” writing mechanics and finally achieve the A that had been eluding me all year.

Even though Mrs. Talbott’s approach to grammar and writing was quite strict, she did not expect us to simply sink or swim. She did help us by teaching us about outlines and how to try and organize our ideas before we wrote them down. We also had drafts that had to be turned in at various times before our final draft was due. She would conference with us and find out how we were coming along, but ultimately, all of this led up to my nerve-wracking moment when I turned in my packet of research materials with my final draft. There was nothing left for me to do except was impatiently for my grade. A few weeks later, our papers were returned to us, and it seemed to take forever for me to find the grade sheet upon which there was the following mark: A-. I had done it! I had finally achieved an A from Mrs. Talbott. I was ecstatic! I had never worked so hard for a grade in my entire school career before, and the end result was totally worth it for me.

Looking back upon this scenario, I realized that I really do owe Mrs. Talbott a great deal of thanks for making me learn the mechanics of a writer of “standard” English. However, I also learned some techniques I will probably not use as a future teacher. While I do think it is important for students to know the mechanics and how to state themselves in a professional, well-spoken manner, I never want how a student says something to get in the way of what they have to say. The strict outline and organized format that Mrs. Talbott forced us to adhere to worked for me, but there were many others in my class who did not function well under the pressure of having to follow a strict outline. There are many times when I also need more freedom to truly get down in writing what I really mean and want to say. Also, her grading focused heavily on the mechanics as opposed to students’ voices and styles. She really more wanted students’ voices to adhere to the one she thought we should have, and she believed a strict adherence to correct grammar and mechanics would achieve this. While I do believe a good foundation in grammar is important if students expect to have their academic writing taken seriously and professionally, it is also important that students know their individual voices and writing styles are just as, if not more, important.